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ABSTRACT

Within the European community, demographic changes have been occurring that have particularly affected children. These major transitions, which have direct implications for early childhood care and education, include: (1) increases in life expectancy and reductions in birth rates; (2) a strong overall movement toward individualization of personal life plans; (3) increases in single-parent families; (4) changes in women's views and more mothers in the work force; (5) changes in parenting styles away from stressing conformity and convention and toward promoting competitive individualism, autonomy, and critical thinking; and (6) shifts in parent-child relationships toward a "partnership" style, where quality of relationship is central. These changes are compounded by the presence of greater geographic mobility and broader cultural diversity than ever before. Discontinuity in family development, pluralism in life styles and new and earlier transitions are the hallmark of the present day. Transition research is acutely needed, as little information is available on how children are to bridge the transitions in family development and what kinds of competence can be fostered. Almost no published work exists on intervention programs to help preschoolers with the difficulties of transitions. Transitions in educational processes can be defined analogously to family developmental processes. Contains 28 references. (ET)

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Changes Among Families in Europe and the Future of Early Childhood Education

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I.

Within the realm of the European community, demographic changes have been occuring which have particularly affected children. With regard to structural changes, one should note the increase in the average life expectancy that has occured in all the countries of the European community. From 1960 to 1990, the increases have amounted to 11 years for Portuguese women (10 for men) and 9 years for Greek women (7 for men) (Council of Europe, 1994). According to UN predictions, by the years 2025, 28% of the women and 19% of all the men will be older than 80. Parallel to this development, is an increase in the age at which a couple both marries and has their first child. The countries of the European community have understood that they no longer can keep the population at its present state and that dramatic changes are needed for the upcoming thirty years. The countries most strongly impacted by this are the Mediterranean ones: Italy (with 1.25 children per woman in 1992), Greece (with 1.42 in 1990) and Spain (with 1.23 in 1992). However, Sweden since 1986 shows a significant increase in their birth rate (1.73 in 1985 compared to 2.09 in 1992).

With the increase in life expectancy and the reduction in birth rate, the countries of the European community show a reduction in the percentage of children under 15 years old ranging from 21.1% (for the previous East Germany) to 41.7% for Italy in 1960 to a prediction of only 14.1% for former West Germany to 21.3% for Ireland, for the year 2025. Conspicuous changes

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are especially predicted for Italy and the Netherlands. In these countries there will be approximately a 50% reduction in the percentage of children under 15 years old. The number of children born from unmarried couples varies greatly in Europe: from 57% in Iceland, 49.5% in Sweden, 46.5% in Denmark to only 2.5% in Greece. In former West Germany, the percentage of children born of unmarried parents was 11.1% in 1991, and for East Germany 41.7%.

As a result of a strong movement towards the individualization of personal life plans, childhood in Europe will exist in family structures, increasingly different from the typical family biography of the past. Over the past twenty years, European sociological research, similar to that of the United States, has discovered a great reduction in the number of families with minors, a reduction of so-called "complete families" and a significant increase in the number of one-parent families. In Germany it is now estimated that approximately 29% of all children that are born will have lost contact with one of their biological parents by the time they are 18. The relationship predominantly lost will be that of the father and child. Despite 135,000 divorces in 1992 (1989: approximately 175,000) and 101,337 minors affected by these changes (1989: approximately 145,000), there has been little research done in this area as compared to English speaking countries.

Divorce takes on different meanings throughout Europe. Three regions may be delineated: in the Mediterranean region about 10 to 20% of marriages end in divorce, in central Europe about 30% to 40% and lastly in northern Europe about 40% to 50%. Divorce, single parenthood and remarriage (and in many cases a second divorce) are developmental transitions in families, whose impact on young children, have rarely been studied in Europe until now.

Variations in family structure are not the only problems to be concerned with today. The present situation in Europe is

related to changes in the concepts of what it is to be a marriage partner; how one is to raise children and the parent-child relationship in general.

Firstly, women see themselves in a new way. The most obvious indicator of this change is the growing participation of women in the workforce. This is especially noticed for single mothers and mothers between the ages of 20 and 35. Today approximately 68% of all single mothers are working. The largest growth rate within the work force after World War II is comprised of women between the ages of 20 and 35 years old. In Bavaria in 1989, (52% of all women between 18 and 55 years old were working, according to the study done by the State Institute for Early Childhood Education and Family Research (Nauck,1993)). Not only has the percentage of workers changed but also the attitudes to paid work by both genders. In a representative study in 1991, 80% of all respondents approved to full-time employment (as long as no children were involved). 17% supported part-time employment for one partner and only 3% were against the wife working.

Secondly, studies done in the eighties showed changes in parenting styles. No longer are conventional norms and conformity stressed but rather competitive individualism, autonomy and critical thinking. Duty, obedience, and being subordinate are less valued now, whereas autonomy and independence have taken their place (Schneewind, 1992).

Thirdly, dramatic changes in the parent-child relationship can be observed. In the European community children do not have an economic benefit for their parents any longer, but rather a psychological one, one important for the making of meaning. 61% of the respondents would even say that children are actually an economic burden and 71% (predominantly women) think that children complicate the combination of family and

work life. As a result of the "value of the child" changing, new parent-child relationships have evolved. The demands for autonomy by the child: being accepted and even stressed by parents now, have resulted in a quality of relationship that could be described as a partnership. The role of the parent has shifted from that of raising the child with all its educational functions to one where the relationship is central. With this new child-oriented focus by each parent however, the relationship between the parents may in fact be weakened (Schütze, 1988).

The conditions of life have not only changed within the family system but also on other system levels. Women and children suffer the most from the difficulties of combining work and family, and they suffer the most from a new poverty in Europe. Single parents and families with many children are most often burdened by economic deprivation. Additional problematic factors are being publicly discussed. To mention a few: structural oppression of women and children, the increase of right-wing radicalism in Europe, unemployment, violence against children, child neglect and sexual abuse.

Recent societal changes, will have direct consequences on early childhood education in Europe. An example, is fact that the Federal Republic of Germany has experienced the largest rate of immigration in its history: between 1981 and 1990, 2.2 million people have immigrated (Presse- und Informationsblatt der Bundesregierung, Nr. 2/92.). Families in Europe face a greater geographic mobility as well as a broader cultural diversity than previously, and these will cause significant changes in the lives of families and particularly children.

The pluralization of life styles, discontinuity in family development, and the stresses of coping with normative and non-normative life events are factors which make up the present day scenario for families in the European community. Today, family life in Europe faces a reorganization of its social

networks, the impact of increased geographic mobility and both an advanced cultural and linguistic diversity. Parents and children alike presently share a greater amount of discontinuity to integrate and an ever increasing number of normative and non-normative transitions to contend with. Concepts of early childhood education in the seventies and eighties have been developed for what was then a normative family type and on a mono-cultural and mono-lingual basis for children of the respective societal majorities. Facing these general changes within European society, the question may be posed as to whether previously developed concepts of early childhood education are still valid.

II

With the mentioned changes in mind, it may be necessary to consider a new orientation for early childhood education in Germany. Although I cannot deal with all these questions in detail, I would like to make a few points.

a) In the past years in Germany, the discussion concerning the education of migrant children has lead to controversy. No matter what theoretical viewpoint was taken, the problems were considered to be solely of those of the minority children. Only in a few exceptions was the role of the German children discussed or the needed changes of our educational concepts considered. With the ongoing integration of the European community, new questions arise about the quality of education. What conditions need to be achieved for children to become competent and autonomous members of the future European union? Will concepts based on mono-cultural populations meet our demands for future childhood education? Another aspect to be addressed and up to this point has received little attention, is the question of the openness to

cultural diversity by the individual, institutional and societal levels. In the future, it will be necessary to reflect this cultural diversity in research (Harms & Clifford, 1980).

b) Up until now the impact of separation and divorce on child development has not been a topic of educational research. The same can be said for family settings with unwed mothers, unmarried partners, single parents and step-parents etc., even though foreign studies would indicate the necessity to deal with these themes. Changed family structures force small children to integrate disparate family settings. The children for instance must accomodate to a new partner of a parent, adapt to a new sibling constellation in a step-family and/or develop new relationships to members of a quasi-family network, for which precise terms are presently not common. Little information is available as to how children are to bridge these transitions in family development and what kind of competence can be fostered for such situations. With the exception of Rossiter's (1989) work, no published intervention programs exist which help preschoolers cope with the difficulties of transitions.

c) In addition to the family transitions mentioned, the children also have to deal with transitions inherent in their institutional education: the transition from family to crèche, from crèche to pre-school, from pre-school to school etc. Until now, transitions have been marked by external criteria (ie. the age of child or the time of transition into a new institution etc.). However, attempts are being made at defining transitions as phases of intense and accelerated development that are socially processed (Welzer, 1993).

Transition research has been taken into account by the educational field (Beller, in press; Betsalel-Presser, 1989; Blaska, 1989; Brewer, 1990; Conn-Powers et al., 1990; Fowler, 1982; Gulley et al., 1991; Love et al., 1992; Loque & Love, 1992; Pallas, 1993; Rice & O'Brien, 1990; Sharma, 1988; Waxler et al., 1990), but the conceptual underpinnings of what constitutes transition remain behind sociological (cf. Welzer, 1993) and psychological research (cf. Cowan & Hetherington, 1991; Cowan & Cowan, 1992; Bond & Wagner, 1988; Falicov, 1988). Therefore, the proposal is made to define transitions in the educational processes analogously to family developmental processes. These changes are on individual as well as interactional levels and are mediated by social processing. Transitions are no longer exclusively defined by external criteria but more importantly by psychological variables. A further proposal is to deal with the question as to whether coping with transitions in childhood can be compared to coping with transitions in adulthood. Longitudinal studies in this field should demonstrate relations between subsequent transitions in childhood and in adulthood. As for intervention research, the view is held that the fostering of competence for coping with transitions should be evaluated for their preventative effects. Initial efforts in this direction are presently being undertaken by Niesel and Griebel in our institute in Munich.

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